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ABSTRACT

This study used a Delphi survey to examine what undergraduate student government leaders think about increasing student involvement in self-governance activities. Twenty-students from geographically diverse institutions of higher education participated in the three rounds of the Delphi study. They generated a total of 56 different strategies and techniques for increasing student participation. They achieved consensus on 15 strategies centered on three general themes: publicity, structure and process, and attitudes. Students believed that undergraduate student involvement could be increased by creating a positive image on campus for student leaders, creating a student government structure that accomplishes its goals, and having administrators respect the decisions of student government units. No significant differences were found between the perceptions of student leaders at research-oriented universities and at liberal arts colleges. Attached tables detail the study's findings. (Contains 16 references.) (DB)

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Increasing Student Involvement in Self-Governance Activities: A Delphi Approach

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Abstract

Student involvement in higher education governance has been a major issue for colleges and universities since their inception. During the past 30 years, the evolving nature of student representation has been noticed within practitioner-oriented circles, but has not developed the academic base once alluded to by the growth of scholarship in the early 1970s. The current study was designed to develop an understanding of how undergraduate student government leaders believe that more students can become involved in self-governance activities, and what they can do, as individuals and as self-governance units, to increase this involvement. Through the use of a three-round Delphi survey, consensus was developed on a listing of 15 strategies and techniques for increasing student involvement.

"Increasing Student Involvement in Self-Governance Activities: A Delphi Approach"

Higher education institutions typically operate under a set of assumptions surrounding participative decision making. This involvement, which encompasses faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, the business community, trustees, and state policy makers, has also been viewed in terms of the importance of student participation. Despite this belief, student participation in self-governance activities has been largely ignored in recent research, and has become an area of increased practitioner-oriented discussion.

While student activism has been common throughout the history of American higher education, dating to even the founding of Harvard College in the early-1600s, activism did not receive widespread attention until the 1940s (Cartwright, 1995). Following the end of World War II, student demands for non-traditional services, such as married student housing and evening course offerings, demonstrated the ability of students to speak out and be heard in policy and administrative decision making. Less than 20 years later, student activism received widespread national attention and was noted as part "of the machine which drove faculty and administrators to recognize that the structures, systems, and content of the college curricula needed to be changed" (Miller & Nelson, 1996, p. 2). Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, student unrest and involvement on

college campuses was an issue of interest to faculty, administrators, and politicians across the United States.

The current study was designed to develop an understanding of how student governance leaders view the process of increasing the numbers of students involved in self-governance activities. A series of strategies and techniques was identified and rated by student leaders. The study was intended to strengthen the ability of student leaders to increase the awareness and involvement of the study body. These strategies and techniques were also studied to discover if differences existed based on the organizational cultures of the institution. Specific research questions addressed through the research include: What strategies or techniques do student governance leaders believe will increase involvement by students in the self-governance activities? What thematic categories can be identified by clustering these strategies? And do significant differences exist between the ratings of the strategies based on institutional scope and mission?

Particular significance related to the investigation can be traced to the new methods for increasing student participation in governance, allowing for increased representation which provides students with a stronger collective voice to be heard in institutional decision-making. Through the involvement of more students in self-governance, administrators, faculty, and policy makers will be placed in a position of responsiveness where they must listen and respond to the needs of their clients. The

involvement of undergraduates also allows for the creation of stronger consensus among institutional constituents regarding changes which may currently face colleges and universities in response to declining resource allocation.

Framework of the Study

The idea of participatory governance and student empowerment is extremely valuable for both administrators and policy-making bodies. Inherent in the concept of participatory decision making is that of consensus development and shared authority. These ideas work to enable institutional leaders to implement policy and decisions on matters of importance. Only through the acceptance of decisions made can higher education institutions answer many of the critics who have charged them with having "bloated administrations" (Bergmann, 1991, p. 12).

A variety of institutional governance models have been suggested. Birnbaum (1989) offered a five dimensional approach to classifying institutional governance. He reported colleges and universities typically fall into one of five classifications, with much internal overlapping: collegial, bureaucratic, political, anarchical, and cybernetic. Basing his classification largely on supposition and practical experience, Birnbaum concluded his discussion with the contention that no institution exclusively "fits" into one category. Consequently, researchers (Miller, McCormack, & Newman, 1995) have utilized Birnbaum's classification system to describe current practice in

participatory faculty governance. Miller, McCormack, and Newman (1995), however, found no significant differences among faculty involvement in governance based on institutional typology.

Extending the concept of modeling in shared governance, a number of schematics have been devised which frame shared governance among faculty and administrators. There have been relatively few efforts to refine the methods in which students can be involved in shared governance. Subsequently, the eight-step ladder approach advocated by Miller, McCormack, Maddox, and Seagren (1996) and Arnstein (1976) was selected as applicable to student governance activities. The ladder of progressive involvement and empowerment was originally offered to educators by Arnstein (1976) in relation to community involvement, particularly parents in working with local schools.

The current study offered the suggestion that the ladder approach of progressive empowerment is acceptable for students as well as faculty and parents. In such an instance, students move from levels of non-participation (manipulation and therapy) to partnerships, power, and control (Figure 1). The acceptance of an assumed positive correlation between increasing student power with involvement provided the basis for the conceptual grounding of the current study.

Student Involvement in Governance

Schlesinger and Baldridge (1982) wrote that student participation in academic governance decreased in the 1980s.

They reported the following as central factors in the reduction of involvement: (a) After the student activism of the 1960s and 1970s decreased, students became apathetic; (b) students focused their attention on studying and career planning; (c) increased state control took many decisions away from individual campuses; (d) the students who served on committees and on governing boards did not have much influence.

Arguments have been presented both for and against student participation on governing boards. Schlesinger and Baldridge (1982) reported several factors which support student involvement on governing boards. First, students should be able to express their opinions regarding curricular matters. Second, boards with student members are more concerned with issues which affect students. And third, student membership facilitates open communication among students, faculty, administration, and trustees.

Schlesinger and Baldridge (1982) also acknowledged arguments which discourage the presence of students on institutional governing boards. Claiming that students do not understand the complexity of issues, they use their membership on boards to express their problems with authority, and, perhaps most important, real problem solving is accomplished through the joint efforts of small groups of trustees and administrators.

When institutions consider student participation in governance, many factors may be addressed. The institution may determine the means through which students may gain and use

authority (Alexander, 1969). The issues that are of greatest concern to students may be identified. When students divide their interests over several issues, their influence may be weakened (Schlesinger & Baldridge, 1982).

Schlesinger and Baldridge (1982) reported that students who serve on governing boards feel frustrated when they do not feel prepared to deal with the issues involved. Orientation sessions in which students would be trained and would be told what to expect may alleviate their anxiety, but would involve additional funding and time during a period of scarce resources.

The degree to which students participate in institutional governance activities can be decided by each individual institution. In some cases, informal participation may be just as effective as formal participation. Rights of participation are most effective when academic freedom and standards of accreditation are preserved (Smith, 1980).

Student involvement in university governance can be part of an effective relationship among students, faculty, and administrators. Through a partnership, institutions can maintain an awareness of how the students perceive the institution, the faculty, and the administration. Such an awareness can prevent miscommunication and adversity. A partnership model can be established at the state level to enforce the policy state-wide or system-wide (Smith, 1980).

Researchers have found that students who are involved with student organizations and activities have an enhanced view of the

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workplace and of their roles as workers (Albrecht, Carpenter, & Sivo, 1994; Williams & Winston, 1985). In a study conducted to examine the relationship between college activities, grades, and job placement, employers were asked about the importance of student activities. Employers' responded that they looked for potential employees who had demonstrated success in both academics and leadership, with high grades being valued more than activities (Albrecht et al., 1994).

Astin (1984) defined student involvement as "the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 307). According to Seitchek (1982), student involvement refers to behaviors that stimulate students cognitively, emotionally, and socially.

Involvement encompasses many areas, including participation in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty members and administrators. Astin's (1984) student involvement theory hypothesizes that the effectiveness of any educational policy is directly linked to the capacity of that policy to increase student involvement. The theory categorizes student time and energy as institutional resources.

Astin (1984) and Cooper, Healey, and Simpson (1994) described the relationship between student involvement and learning through four postulates: (a) Involvement is defined as the investment of psychological and physical energy in the student experience, (b) students invest different amounts of

energy in an activity, (c) student involvement has features that are both quantitative and qualitative in nature, and (d) the amount of student learning and development is related to the capacity of the practice to include student involvement.

Design and Methods

To achieve the objective of group consensus, quasi-qualitative research methods were selected for use. Specifically, the Delphi survey technique, which allows for equality in group input, reflection, and the participation of geographically diverse experts in the area of study, was chosen as the primary method of data collection. Chief student affairs officers were requested to nominate at least one student leader from their campus. A desired sample size of 30 was chosen based on academic precedence involving the Delphi technique (Rojewski, 1990).

A total of 20 student leaders participated in all three rounds of the study. These student leaders generated 57 different strategies and techniques for increasing student participation in self-governance activities by responding to the open-ended request "Please list up to five ways in which you believe student participation in self-governance activities can be increased."

All strategies were rated during Round 2 of the Delphi survey, and those which had a mean score of 4.0 or higher on the 1-to-5 Likert-type (1=very low agreement; 3=medium agreement;

5=very high agreement) scale were retained for rating in Round 3. The threshold of 4.0 (high agreement to very high agreement) was determined based on the rationale of achieving group consensus of agreement. The 15 remaining items were presented to study participants along with group data, including mean, median, mode, and the student leader's previous rating response. All data were collected during the Fall of 1996.

Results

A total of 20 students participated in all three rounds of the Delphi-survey study. These student leaders generated 57 different strategies and techniques for increasing student participation in self-governance activities. Utilizing a threshold of a 4.0 overall mean rating, 15 items remained to be rated in the third (final) round of data collection.

Student leaders believed that undergraduate student involvement in self-governance activities could be increased by creating a positive image on campus for the student leaders, creating a student government structure that accomplishes its goals, and having administrators respect the decisions of student government units. These three items were all rated 4.5 and above on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, indicating high to very high group agreement. Additional strategies were identified and were rated at lower levels of agreement (see Table 1).

The 15 strategies which received high to very high levels of agreement by student leaders were examined in relation to

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content, particularly providing attention to the context or theme represented in the strategy. The strategies and techniques, using triangulation of data between the researcher and non-bias evaluators, resulted in the identification of three distinct cluster areas: publicity, structure and process, and attitudes (see Table 2).

Differences in institutional culture were identified in the literature as a possible factor influencing the involvement of both faculty and students in decision making. As such, institutional scope and mission was included as a variable in analysis. Utilizing an ANOVA with an alpha level of .01, no significant differences were found between the perceptions of research-oriented university student leaders and liberal arts college student leaders (f scores are presented in Table 1).

Findings and Discussion

Student leaders agree that there are a host of activities which could increase the involvement of students in self-governance activities. Responding student leaders highly to very highly agreed that 15 items in particular would be effective in increasing student involvement. These 15 items were clustered thematically, and seemed to portray the collegiate experience as one similar to society away from higher education, where a barrage of motivations excite and entice individuals to become active in community, civic, and political activities.

Findings indicated that student leaders focused their responses around three specific themes. The three themes were identified as areas that could be addressed in increasing student participation in self-governance activities. The content areas included publicity, structure and process, and attitudes. The items which were classified by these themes were rated highly by the student leaders. These high rankings illustrated that student leaders feel these areas need to be addressed from all perspectives of the campus, particularly those areas supported by offices of student life or student activities.

Institutional cultures may determine or be determined by student involvement, yet institutional scope and mission was not found to dramatically impact techniques or motivations for getting students involved.

Student leaders believe that participation can be increased. The overall ratings of the items coupled with the consistency of themes identified seem to indicate that student leaders may also believe that participation should be increased. For example, the Student Government Association elections at The University of Alabama in 1996 had a 26% undergraduate voter turnout, and some may argue that one-quarter of the student body making policy for the student population as a whole may be establishing a precedence of misrepresentation.

Research concerning the motivation for involvement among undergraduates and graduates alike should be undertaken. This research may be aligned with traditional student development

research which has explored the motives and relationships among students involved in co-curricular activities. In particular, survey research may prove to be especially beneficial in this area, as generalizable findings will prove to be of special interest to professional associations, student affairs leaders, and those responsible for developing leadership among undergraduate students.

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Figure 1.

Ladder of Progressive Involvement and Empowerment for Students

8	Student Control	Degrees of Student Power
7	Delegated Power	
6	Partnership	
5	Placation	Degrees of Tokenism
4	Consultation	
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	Non-Participation
1	Manipulation	

Table 1

Research University and Liberal Arts College Student Leaders Ratings of Strategies and Techniques: A Comparison

Strategy/ Technique	Res Unv Mean (SD)	Lib Arts Mean (SD)	F	Overall Mean (SD)
Administrators should respect decisions of student governments.	4.30 (.9487)	4.70 (.6749)	.2916	4.50 (.83)
Demonstrate student government effectiveness so others will want to join.	4.20 (.6325)	4.20 (.6325)	1.0000	4.20 (.62)
Emphasize the importance of the position each student holds.	3.70 (.6749)	3.80 (1.0328)	.8006	3.75 (.85)
Establish a relationship between the student government and student organizations.	4.40 (.6992)	4.10 (.8756)	.4083	4.25 (.79)
Be visible to first-year students.	4.30 (.8233)	4.40 (.8233)	.7915	4.35 (.81)
Foster cooperation between the student government and the institution's administration.	4.30 (.6749)	4.40 (.6992)	.7486	4.35 (.67)
Create a student government structure that accomplishes its goals.	4.70 (.6749)	4.60 (.5164)	.7142	4.65 (.59)

Table 1, continued

Research University and Liberal Arts College Student Leaders Ratings of Strategies and Techniques: A Comparison

Strategy/ Technique	Res Unv Mean (SD)	Lib Arts Mean (SD)	F	Overall Mean (SD)
Increase student representation on faculty and staff committees.	4.30 (1.0593)	4.67 (.7071)	.3931	4.47 (.90)
Keep the student media involved and interested.	4.00 (.9428)	3.80 (.7888)	.6132	3.90 (.85)
Encourage new student involvement through demonstrating past accomplishments of the student government.	3.60 (.8433)	3.80 (.6325)	.5560	3.70 (.73)
Make students aware of options and roles available through the student government.	4.10 (.7379)	3.90 (.7379)	.5520	4.00 (.73)
Give the students a feeling of ownership.	4.30 (.6749)	4.30 (1.0593)	1.0000	4.30 (.86)
Create a positive image on campus for the student leaders.	4.60 (.5164)	4.70 (.4830)	.6601	4.65 (.49)

Table 1, continued

Research University and Liberal Arts College Student Leaders Ratings of Strategies and Techniques: A Comparison

Strategy/ Technique	Res Unv Mean (SD)	Lib Arts Mean (SD)	F	Overall Mean (SD)
Provide a consistent time and a consistent location for student government meetings.	4.10 (.8756)	4.30 (.6749)	.5743	4.20 (.77)
Publicize student government meetings and activities.	4.40 (.5164)	4.20 (.7888)	.5109	4.30 (.66)

alpha = .01

Table 2

Thematic Clustering of Strategies and Techniques for Increasing Student Involvement in Governance

Cluster Theme	Strategy/ Technique
Publicity	Create a positive image on campus for the student leaders. Be visible to first-year students. Publicize student government meetings and activities. Make students aware of options and roles available through the student government. Keep the student media involved and interested.
Structure and Process	Create a student government structure which accomplishes its goals. Increase student representation on faculty and staff committees. Foster cooperation between the student government and the institution's administration. Establish a relationship between the student government and student organizations. Provide a consistent time and location for student government meetings.
Attitudes of Actors	Administrators should respect decisions of student government leaders. Give the students a feeling of ownership. Demonstrate student government effectiveness so others will want to join. Emphasize the importance of the position each student holds. Encourage new student involvement through demonstrating past accomplishments of the student government.

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